

September 18, 2009 - Murtha Lands \$2 million for Washington Township Sewer Project

Valley Independent

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By Jeff Pikulsky

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WASHINGTON TOWNSHIP - When township resident Jamie Miller met U.S. Rep. John Murtha on the 2002 campaign trail, she asked him to find grant money for a much-needed sewer project.

"He looked me right in the eye and said, 'When Washington Township needs me, I'm going to be there,'" she recalled.

Miller, now a township supervisor, said she and the community are thankful the Johnstown Democrat made good on his promise.

Township officials Wednesday learned that Murtha has secured a \$2 million grant through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the \$20.8 million sewer project at a most crucial time.

Murtha previously helped provide a \$1 million grant for the project from the same source.

"I just put my head down and these tears started to flow, and I don't cry easily," Miller said of hearing about the most recent award. "The man stuck to his word.

"Every one of these residents and his constituents, I hope they write him a letter of thanks."

The municipal authority board delivered the news to the public Thursday at a joint meeting with the township supervisors.

For the past several months, the board has scrambled to find more grant money to lower lofty tap-in fees that the mostly elderly population can't afford.

The tap-in fees originally were estimated at more than \$5,000 per homeowner.

On July 14, the Commonwealth Financing Authority approved a \$950,000 H2O PA grant for the project.

The board requested \$7.5 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture program, which will distribute \$800 million over 10 years for water projects.

The H2O PA money helped lower the tentative tap-in fee to \$4,800 per customer.

In July, the authority board members said they would seek a 40-year low-interest loan from the Rural Utilities Service, a branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The board originally planned to borrow up to \$7 million to lower the tap-in fees and increase monthly service rates in exchange.

Board Chairwoman Dee Fisher said, because of the \$2 million grant, the projected tap-in fee will be \$625.

The board now plans to borrow about \$5 million from RUS at a 2.6 percent interest rate.

Monthly rates are now estimated at \$61, Fisher said.

Fisher said Murtha came through for the township at "the 11th hour."

The state Department of Environmental Protection and the Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority - which is providing a \$1.2 million grant and a low-interest 30-year, \$9.8 million loan for the project - recently warned authority officials that the township would soon face penalties if the project did not begin.

"DEP said they're tired of fooling around with us and we don't have a choice," Fisher said. "If we didn't move now, they weren't going to be kind with us."

"PennVEST has been holding our money for about two years, so we had to move. It was to the point that I got a very good impression that we better do it or we're going to be in court."

Fisher said she did not expect a \$2 million grant.

"I knew for a week or so that we were going to get some money, and I was praying for a million," she said.

Miller agreed that the time to start the project had run out.

"It's been on the books since 1957 to have it," she said of the project. "DEP said, 'You've got to do it. Do or die.' But, they were very congenial.

"The community really came to the forefront on this one. They sent their letters to Congressman Murtha asking for help and they made phone calls. This was a community effort on this one. No one person can take the credit for this."

Fisher said construction is scheduled to begin in December.

The project should take 12 to 18 months to complete, she said.

Contractors hired in January to do the work agreed not to raise their prices.

That agreements ended this week, but Fisher said another round of extension requests have gone out.

"Letters went out Sept. 11," she said. "Since

they see now we're going to move on the project, they'll probably be okay with that.

"I do know that the price of pipe has gone up since some of these contractors have bid it. That could raise the cost of this project about a quarter million dollars."

The supervisors have set aside \$214,000 in Community Development Block Grant money in the past two years that will assist low-income families with tap-in fees.

The authority is seeking a \$500,000 competitive grant from the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority for the same purpose.

Fisher said the U.S. Department of Agriculture is also offering tap-in fee assistance for low-income families.

"I'm pushing for more money so we can push the debt service down," Fisher said.

Fisher said township officials are searching for ways to help customers afford paying to have connecting lines installed from their homes to the system.

Fisher said tap-in fee bills will be mailed in March.

"We can't wait 'til the last minute," she said.
"We need money to start paying these contractors."

Payment plans will be available at the township office, she said.

Fisher said information about assistance programs will be sent to customers with their bills.

She extended her gratitude to Murtha on behalf of the township.

"We are ecstatic," she said. "We really thank him from the bottom of our hearts. He promised a long time ago he would help us as soon as he could and he really came through. I just thank him forever. My heart's relieved."